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China's Vice President Xi Jinping Visits the United States: What Is at Stake?

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Introduction

Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping (pronounced *Shee Jin-ping*) is scheduled to visit the United States in mid-February, 2012, returning Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.'s August 2011 visit to China, which Xi hosted. The fact that Xi is the heir apparent to China's current top leader, Hu Jintao, who is scheduled to retire in the coming year, makes this more than an ordinary vice-presidential visit. Xi's trip is designed to help him build relationships with American policymakers and legislators and introduce himself to the American business community and the American people on the eve of his becoming China's top leader. As important to the Chinese side, the trip could also play an important role in helping boost Xi's stature back home, where he is so far known as much for having a famous father, early Communist Party revolutionary Xi Zhongxun, and a famous wife, military folk singer Peng Liyuan, as for his own achievements.

Xi is scheduled to meet with President Barack Obama at the White House on February 14, 2012. He will also spend time with his official host, Vice President Biden, and meet with Congressional leaders and members of the cabinet. Xi is scheduled to give a policy speech in Washington on February 15, 2012, and then travel to Iowa, a state that has seen its agricultural exports to China soar in recent years. In Muscatine, Iowa, Xi will reunite with people he first met in 1985, when he visited with a provincial animal-feed delegation. In Des Moines, he will meet with Iowa's governor, Terry E. Branstad, whom he also met on the 1985 trip, when Branstad was serving his first term as governor. The last leg of Xi's visit to the United States will take him to Los Angeles on February 16 and 17, 2012. There he will meet with Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa and California Governor Jerry Brown, attend a trade and economic forum, and take in a Los Angeles Lakers basketball game at the Staples Center. Vice President Biden will accompany Xi throughout his time in Los Angeles.

If all goes as the Chinese leadership has planned, seven to nine months after Xi returns to China, he will be named to the top position in the Chinese Communist Party, General Secretary. He is expected to be named State President in March 2013. Barring the emergence of serious splits in the leadership, he is expected to hold both posts for two five-year terms. Xi is also on track to become the head of China's military, perhaps as early as this year. Even with all of those posts, Xi's power will be more circumscribed than that of an American president; he will serve as the first among equals on the Communist Party's top decision-making body, and will need consensus from his colleagues for all major decisions. Efforts to consolidate authority could make Xi's first years in power unpredictable. Nonetheless, China is presenting him as the man likely to serve as China's top official until March 2023.

The Stakes for China and for the United States

The United States has significant stakes in the U.S.-China relationship, and therefore in the relationship that U.S. officials and the U.S. Congress establish with China's next leader. China, also known as the People's Republic of China or PRC, is the world's second largest economy and the United States' second largest trading partner. Its rapidly modernizing military is unsettling Asian neighbors and has become a major factor driving U.S. military planning. With China a permanent, veto-wielding member of the United Nations Security Council, Washington seeks Chinese cooperation on a host of issues important to the United States, from Iran and North Korea, to Syria and Sudan.

With Xi's trip to the United States, the Obama Administration hopes to begin to establish an easier relationship with China's next top leader than it has enjoyed with the current one, Hu Jintao, a stiff Party official who rarely, if ever, strays from his briefing book. The U.S. goal is to

have with Xi the sort of relationship that will allow for give and take, enabling leaders of the two countries to find common ground, discuss their many differences in more constructive ways than they do now, and begin to build a level of strategic trust in the bilateral relationship that has proved elusive under Hu.

The U.S.-China relationship is crowded with issues requiring high-level management, both urgent and longer-term in nature. All would benefit from top U.S. officials having a stronger working relationship with Xi than it has currently with Hu. A short-list of major issues in the relationship includes:

- **The U.S. “pivot” toward Asia.** Although the Obama Administration has denied that its announcement of a re-balancing toward Asia is aimed at keeping a rising China in check, Western media analysis has ascribed the policy to the need to respond to Chinese assertiveness on maritime territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. The Chinese government has so far been cautious in its assessment. A number of Chinese commentators have, however, characterized elements of the policy, particularly strengthened U.S. military ties with Australia and the Philippines, as hostile toward China and have called on China’s leaders to harden the country’s policy toward the United States in response. In Washington, Xi will be seeking more information about U.S. intentions.
- **Violence in Syria.** China joined Russia in vetoing a U.N. Security Council resolution backing an Arab League peace plan for Syria, where thousands have been killed in clashes between anti-government protesters and the forces of President Bashar al-Assad. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said she was “disgusted” by the vetoes, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called them a “travesty.”¹
- **Iran’s nuclear program.** Since 2006, China has been an important partner in U.S.- and European-led multilateral efforts to rein in Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons program. To bring new pressure to bear on Tehran over its nuclear program, the United States and the European Union are urging other nations to end or reduce oil imports from Iran. China, a major importer of Iranian oil, has balked, expressing opposition to “pressuring or international sanctions,” and a preference for dialogue with Iran. U.S. officials do not discount the possibility, however, that China might quietly reduce its imports anyway. Iranian oil currently accounts for 11% of all China’s oil imports, and 5% of China’s total oil supply.²
- **North Korea.** North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, involvement in weapons proliferation, and record of acts of aggression against its enemies, particularly South Korea, have all put the country on the U.S. shortlist of international issues

¹ Joseph Logan and Patrick Worsnip, “Anger After Russia, China Block U.N. Action on Syria,” *Reuters*, February 5, 2012. Expressing concern for preserving Syria’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, the Chinese Mission to the United Nations said in a statement that it did not want, “to put undue emphasis on pressuring the Syrian government, prejudice the result of the dialogue or impose any solution.” People’s Republic of China Mission to the United Nations, “Explanation of Vote by Ambassador Li Baodong after Adoption of Security Council Draft Resolution on Syria,” press release, February 5, 2012, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t901714.htm>. For more information about the violence in Syria, see CRS Report RL33487, *Unrest in Syria and U.S. Sanctions Against the Assad Regime*, by Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard.

² Michael Wines, “China Balks as Geithner Presses for Iran Curbs,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2012. For more information, see CRS Report 97-231, *Iran: U.S. Policy and Options*, by Kenneth Katzman.

- requiring high-level management. With the December 2011 death of North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il, and the installation of his 20-something son, Kim Jong-un, as the North's new leader, the U.S. is looking to China, North Korea's closest friend and ally, to help keep North Korea from engaging in fresh provocations and to draw North Korea back into negotiations aimed at dismantling its nuclear weapons program.³
- **The European debt crisis.** Despite public skepticism in China about coming to the aid of rich nations, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently that China was considering using more of its \$3.18 trillion in foreign-exchange reserves to bail out struggling European economies.⁴ Chinese assistance could help stabilize the Eurozone, reducing the drag of Europe's economic woes on the U.S. economy.⁵
 - **China's economic model.** Long-standing U.S. complaints about China's allegedly under-valued currency, China's support for state-owned industries, its discriminatory policies toward foreign businesses, and its weak protections for intellectual property have coalesced into a broader U.S. critique of China's economic model, sometimes referred to as "state capitalism." In his January 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama signaled impatience with progress in addressing U.S. concerns, declaring, "I will not stand by when our competitors don't play by the rules." Referring specifically to China, he added, "It's not right when another country lets our movies, music, and software be pirated. It's not fair when foreign manufacturers have a leg up on ours only because they're heavily subsidized."⁶ The United States and China may release a joint fact sheet during Xi's trip outlining modest progress on economic issues.⁷
 - **China's human rights record.** China's human rights record is an even more longstanding thorn in the bilateral relationship. With China's political transition approaching, many observers see signs that the Communist Party's ongoing crackdown on dissent is intensifying. The U.S. government has also criticized as "counterproductive" Chinese policies in Tibetan areas of China, which the United States has linked to the self-immolations of Tibetans.⁸ Since March 2011, 20 Tibetans have set fire to themselves to protest Chinese policies. Chinese security forces were reported to have opened fire on Tibetan demonstrators on at least three occasions in January 2012, resulting in several deaths.⁹

³ For more information, see CRS Report R41259, *North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation*, by Emma Chanlett-Avery.

⁴ Eliot Gao, "China Tackles Public Skepticism Over Euro Bailout," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2012.

⁵ For more information, see CRS Report R41411, *The Future of the Eurozone and U.S. Interests*, coordinated by Raymond J. Ahearn.

⁶ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," transcript, January 24, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

⁷ For more information, see CRS Report RL33536, *China-U.S. Trade Issues*, by Wayne M. Morrison and CRS Report RS21625, *China's Currency Policy: An Analysis of the Economic Issues*, by Wayne M. Morrison and Marc Labonte.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Statement by Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Maria Otero," press release, January 24, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/182424.htm>.

⁹ International Campaign for Tibet, "Tibetan Student Killed, Several Injured, After Police Open Fire in Ngaba; News of Two More Prayer Vigils for New Year," January 27, <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-student-killed-several-injured-after-police-open-fire-ngaba-news-two-more-prayer-v>. For more information, see CRS Report RL34729, *Human Rights in China and U.S. Policy*, by Thomas Lum.

- **Cyber-security.** Both the United States and China have stated their interest in maintaining security in cyberspace. In recent Congressional testimony, however, the Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper alleged that “entities” in China and Russia are “responsible for extensive illicit intrusions into U.S. computer networks and theft of U.S. intellectual property.”¹⁰
- **Taiwan.** Xi is almost certain to raise China’s unhappiness over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, the self-governing island of 23 million over which China claims sovereignty, and with which China has vowed to reunify, by force if necessary. China argues that arms sales embolden forces in Taiwan pushing for the island to formalize its separation from mainland China. The January 2012 re-election of Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou, who has pursued closer economic ties with China, challenges that argument. Washington notes that U.S. law in the form of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (P.L. 96-8) requires the United States “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive nature.”¹¹

Xi’s views on these and other issues remain largely unknown. Even as China’s top leader, Xi will not by himself be able to determine China’s policy. With the Chinese Communist Party ever fearful of the emergence of a Chinese Gorbachev, China’s collective leadership is designed to prevent any one leader from having too much power. Thus the nine members of China’s top decision-making body, the Communist Party’s Politburo Standing Committee, including the Party General Secretary, make major policy decisions by consensus. Nonetheless, as General Secretary, Xi will have more authority than any other official to set the Party’s agenda. According to China’s Communist Party charter, the General Secretary convenes meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee as well as sitting on it. He also runs the Party Secretariat, which manages the Party bureaucracy and controls the paper flow to top leaders.¹² If, as predicted, Xi becomes chairman of the Party and State Military Commissions, either in the coming year, or later, he will also command a large and well equipped military, albeit one that is largely untested and has at times seemed to test the bonds of civilian control. The State Presidency, the other top post Xi is expected to acquire, is a largely ceremonial position that confers little power in and of itself, but it will allow Xi to attend international meetings with other world leaders, including President Obama, and make trips abroad as China’s head of state.

For Xi, the stakes involved in his trip to the United States are arguably higher than for the U.S. side. Xi’s elevation to the top jobs in China is virtually assured, simply because the Party cannot afford to expose any splits at the top by changing succession plans this late in the game. Although political transitions have historically been messy in China, over the last 20 years the Party has worked to regularize the transfer of power, seeing the costs of open conflict as unacceptable. Nonetheless, Xi still needs to establish his authority throughout the Party ranks. That is particularly true because, unlike his four immediate predecessors, he does not to have the authority that accrues from having been selected for the job by the dominant figure in post-Mao era Chinese politics, Deng Xiaoping, who died in 1997.

Projecting an image back home of someone who is able to hold his own with the U.S. president and command international respect would help Xi establish his authority. For those negotiating

¹⁰ James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, testimony before U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Worldwide Threats*, 112th Cong., 2nd sess., January 31, 2012.

¹¹ For more information, see CRS Report R41952, *U.S.-Taiwan Relationship: Overview of Policy Issues*, by Shirley A. Kan and Wayne M. Morrison.

¹² The relevant language from the Party Charter can be accessed, in Chinese, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-11/18/content_633225_4.htm.

the details of Xi's trip on the Chinese side, matters of protocol—who greets Xi as he steps off his plane, how many minutes he spends in the Oval Office, how many cabinet members he meets—and which top U.S. leaders make ritual commitments to Xi of long-standing U.S. policy toward Taiwan and Tibet, all matter enormously because they can be used within the Party to demonstrate U.S. respect for Xi, and thus boost his stature. Such protocol points and restatements of U.S. policy cost the Obama Administration little; the Administration regularly uses them to extract progress from the Chinese side on issues of substance that matter to the United States, such as economic disputes.

With tough language about China peppering the U.S. presidential race, Xi also hopes on this trip to win over the American business community and man-on-the-street. At the same time, however, with suspicion of U.S. intentions running high in many quarters in China, Xi needs to avoid alienating fellow Party leaders, powerful military leaders, and the rank and file by appearing too close to the United States. Some analysts suggest that Xi already went out on a limb in hosting Vice President Biden in China in August 2011, when he chose not just to meet with Biden in Beijing, but also, unusually, to accompany him on visits in Sichuan Province, in western China. Images from Xi's trip to the United States, including his Iowa reunion with the hosts of his 1985 trip to the American heartland, will inevitably reinforce Xi's association with the United States. So will the fact, little acknowledged in China, that Xi's daughter is enrolled, under a pseudonym, as an undergraduate at Harvard.¹³

Finally, before his elevation, Xi must be mindful not to seem to be charting a different course from his predecessor. Xi has not beaten Hu in any election. He is receiving the top jobs in the Chinese political system with the approval of Hu, who will remain influential even after retirement. Hu and the officials he has put in place throughout the political system and the military will expect Xi to pay due deference to him and his core policies.

Xi Jinping: Biographical Information

Xi Jinping, age 58, is a former top leader of two powerhouse economic provinces along China's east coast, Fujian and Zhejiang. He also served a brief tenure as the Party Secretary of China's wealthiest municipality, Shanghai. Xi is reported to have been a competent, low key, and relatively flexible leader in all those places. That record alone would likely not have been enough, however, to make him a candidate to be China's top leader.

Rather, some analysts believe Xi was propelled to the position of heir apparent because he was acceptable to two major factions who could not agree on anyone else.¹⁴ One faction is made up of officials who associate themselves with former leader Jiang Zemin, a former Party Secretary of Shanghai who, as Communist Party General Secretary and State President, brought China into the World Trade Organization and sought to break down ideological barriers to growth of the private economy. The other faction is made up of officials who associate themselves with current leader Hu Jintao, who spent much of his career in the Communist Youth League and has sought to ease social inequality while championing a state capitalism model that favors state-owned industry.

Bolstering the compromise candidate theory is Xi's relatively narrow resume, which suggests he was identified as a candidate to be China's top leader late in his career. By the time Hu Jintao joined the Politburo Standing Committee as Jiang Zemin's heir apparent in 1992, the Party had

¹³ Melinda Liu, "Can't We Just Be Friends?," *Newsweek*, January 17, 2011.

¹⁴ See, for example, Edward Wong and Jonathan Ansfield, "China Grooming Deft Politicians as Next Leader," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2011, and Gady Epstein, "Names You Need to Know in 2011: Xi Jinping," *Forbes.com*, November 16, 2010.

prepared him for the job by assigning him to lead a poor province in south China (Guizhou) and then a major ethnic minority area (Tibet), where he oversaw a tough crackdown on dissent. Before those assignments, Hu had been head of the Communist Youth League, and before that, had worked in another poor province, Gansu in China's northwest. The candidate whom Hu reportedly favored to replace him, Li Keqiang, boasts a similarly diverse resume, having moved from the Communist Youth League in Beijing to lead Henan, a major agricultural province in central China, and then to lead Liaoning, a rust-belt province in the northeast, before winning his spot on the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007.

Xi, in contrast, spent 17 years (1985 to 2002) rising through the ranks of economically dynamic Fujian Province, on China's east coast, opposite Taiwan, and then five years (2002 to 2007) in neighboring Zhejiang Province, an export hub known for its freewheeling private businesses. Those jobs preceded his hurried six-month stint as Party Secretary of nearby Shanghai just before his elevation to the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee in 2007. In those three local posts, Xi was never seriously tested managing unrest or ethnic minority issues, although in Fujian he did have to deal with the repercussions of a major corruption scandal in Xiamen, and in Shanghai he was brought in to restore morale after another corruption scandal claimed the previous party secretary. Xi's time in Fujian gave him a nuanced understanding of the People's Republic of China's complicated relationship with Taiwan, which is located across the Taiwan Strait from Fujian. But the Fujian and Zhejiang jobs focused on trade and investment issues, generally considered more the bailiwick of premiers than Party general secretaries. Moreover, while Xi spent time in poorer areas of China, it was in low-level posts and at the start of his career. At age 15, at the height of Mao Zedong's "Cultural Revolution," Xi was sent to work as an educated youth in the Shaanxi countryside in north China. By the time he left, at age 22, he had been promoted to a local party secretary. Later, between the ages of 29 and 32, he served as a county-level Party official in another rural area, in Hebei Province near Beijing.

As a compromise candidate, Xi had in his favor reported affability—particularly valuable in a consensus-based political system—and a carefully cultivated reputation for living modestly, in contrast to the extravagant lifestyles of some senior Party officials. His trump card, however, may have been his family ties. Xi is the son of a respected member of the first generation of Communist elites, Xi Zhongxun, who had influential comrades-in-arms with networks of supporters spread around the country. Xi is also married to a glamorous singer and actress whose fame greatly eclipses Xi's, even now. Xi's wife, Peng Liyuan, age 49, has spent her entire career with the People's Liberation Army's premier song and dance troupe, which she now heads. Although reforms in the military led to military performers being converted to civilian status, Peng still frequently dons an olive green uniform and holds the rank of a major general.

Xi's status as a "princeling" has not always helped him. Mao Zedong appointed the elder Xi to the post of Vice Premier in 1959, but reportedly purged him three years later, exposing his family to political ostracism and physical hardship for most of the next 16 years. Deng Xiaoping brought Xi Zhongxun back from the political wilderness in the years after Mao's death. The elder Xi served as Party Secretary of Guangdong Province, during which time he successfully pushed for the establishment of China's first special economic zone, in Shenzhen, near Hong Kong. Deng also awarded the elder Xi posts on the Party's Politburo and Secretariat. But Xi Zhongxun reportedly angered Deng in 1989 by opposing the Party's crackdown on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, a stance that presumably complicated his son's political career.¹⁵

¹⁵ Xi Zhongxun's political travails are recounted in Jeremy Page and Mark Peters, "Heartland Return for Chinese Leader," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2012. Xi Zhongxun's official biography is contained in

Friends of Xi's father assisted his career at key junctures. Xi spent three years in his late 20s working as a secretary to a family friend, Geng Biao, in the general office of the Central Military Commission. His experience as an active service military officer in those years gives him greater military bona fides than either of his immediate predecessors as Communist Party General Secretary. Another friend of Xi's father reportedly helped Xi break into Fujian Province politics. The decision-making that led to Xi's selection as Hu Jintao's successor is unknown, but it is likely that he had backing from members of his father's network of supporters and from well-placed fellow princelings whom he would have known growing up. Some accounts state that Hu Jintao was close to Xi Zhongxun.¹⁶ If true, that would help explain Hu's acquiescence to the younger Xi's selection. Other Party officials may have supported Xi Jinping out of a sense that, with Deng Xiaoping gone, the Party is most safely entrusted to the hands of someone intimately acquainted with the idealistic values of the earliest Party organizers, values that many in China see as having been lost in the country's helter skelter pursuit of wealth and modernization in the post-Mao years.

The downside to being a "princeling" is that Xi has long had to battle popular perceptions that all successful offspring of senior leaders owe their success more to parentage than skill and hard work, and that they enjoy lavish lifestyles that set them apart from ordinary people. The Communist Party discourages reporting about the personal lives of top leaders, but what reporting exists on Xi has sought to counteract those images, emphasizing Xi's down-to-earth qualities and shunning of material excess, as well as the humble rural Shandong Province origins of Xi's wife, Peng Liyuan.

Peng's long career in the People's Liberation Army is an additional political asset for her husband. She joined the People's Liberation Army Political Department's Song and Dance Ensemble in 1984, while still an undergraduate at the China Conservatory of Music. In the years since, her renditions of patriotic songs, folk ballads, and military standards such as "My Soldier Brothers" have made her legions of fans across the military and Chinese society at large. In 2007, in her major general's dress uniform with gold braid and medal ribbons, she sang at the celebration of the 80th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army's founding. In 2008, in combat dress, she serenaded the troops on the front lines of earthquake relief. Her popularity in the military may have helped Xi's selection as China's next leader, and may continue to help Xi as he seeks to consolidate power in the years ahead.¹⁷

Peng's philanthropic endeavors have won her goodwill from other parts of Chinese society, too. After serving for several years as a spokeswoman in China for public health causes, in 2011, Peng began a two-year term as an unpaid goodwill ambassador for the World Health Organization, focusing on HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.¹⁸ Since the days of Jiang Qing, also known in the West as Madam Mao Zedong, Chinese first ladies have had almost no public profile, appearing in public only when accompanying their husbands on foreign trips. Peng has signaled that she does not intend to be similarly anonymous, ensuring that in this respect, at least, Xi's era will be different.

中央委员: 中共第一届至十五届 (*Members of the Chinese Communist Party's 1st to 15th Central Committees*), ed. Shen Xueming and Zheng Jianying (Central Party Literature Press 中央文献出版社, 2001), pp. 14-15.

¹⁶ Edward Wong and Jonathan Ansfield, "China Grooming Deft Politicians as Next Leader," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2011.

¹⁷ "彭丽媛的新使命" ("Peng Liyuan's New Mission"), 钱江晚报 *Qianjiang Wanbao*, July 4, 2011.

¹⁸ The World Health Organization, *Peng Liyuan, Goodwill Ambassador for Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS*, http://www.who.int/goodwill_ambassadors/peng_liyuan/en/index.html.

The Political Succession Process and China's 18th Party Congress

China's Communist Party has worked hard in the last 20 plus years to regularize its succession process after 13 years of turmoil at the top of the Chinese political system following the 1976 death of the People's Republic of China's founding father, Mao Zedong. China's current Communist Party General Secretary, Hu Jintao, who took office in 2002, was the first leader of the Party in the post-Mao era to be groomed for the job and installed in office without his predecessor having died in office or been purged.¹⁹ It is a measure of the success of the Party's effort to regularize the succession process that term limits and strict age limits for top Party officials are now accepted as the norm. Today, most politically-aware Chinese assume as a matter of course that Hu will retire later this year, being nearly 70-years-old and having served two five-year terms as Party General Secretary. They assume, too, that six of his nine colleagues on the Party's most senior decision-making body, the Politburo Standing Committee, will retire, as all are age 68 or older, and thus ineligible for re-appointment to the body according to the Party's age limits for top offices. The Party has not given any reason to question those assumptions.

Reading the tea leaves with these new succession rules in mind, Chinese have known since 2007 that Xi Jinping was being groomed to succeed Hu Jintao as China's top leader. That was the year when, after a short stint as Party chief of Shanghai, Xi was named at the Party's 17th Congress to both to the 25-member Politburo and to the exclusive nine-member Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). Until then, another member of the so-called "fifth generation" of Chinese leaders, Li Keqiang, had often been mentioned as a possible successor to Hu. When the Communist Party announced the PSC line-up, however, Xi was ranked sixth, just ahead his potential rival, Li, who was ranked seventh. That signaled that Xi was intended for the top Party job, and Li was being groomed as a future premier. They were the only two leaders appointed to the PSC that year who were young enough to be eligible for reappointment in 2012.

Further signaling that Xi, not Li, was being given the role of understudy to the top Party leader, Xi was also named at the 17th Congress to head the Party Secretariat, the body that manages the Party bureaucracy, and as President of the Communist Party's top training academy for Party cadres, the Central Party School. In 2008, Xi added the title of state Vice President. In 2010, ascending the last major rung on his career ladder to the top, Xi was named Vice Chairman of the Party and State Central Military Commissions. Xi also serves as deputy head of the Party's Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and head of the Party's Hong Kong-Macau Leading Small Group.

Hu is expected to give up the post of Party General Secretary, and Xi to replace him, at the Party's 18th Congress this year. Party Congresses meet every five years, but the exact dates of the meeting are often revealed only a relatively short time in advance. So far, the Communist Party has announced only that the 18th Party Congress will take place in the second half of 2012.

¹⁹ Hua Guofeng became Party leader after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's stunning successful economic reforms, pushed Hua aside in 1981 and installed Hu Yaobang as Party leader, only to purge him in 1985. Deng installed Zhao Ziyang in Hu's place, and then purged him in 1989, following student-led demonstrations that threatened the Communist Party's hold on power. The third party chief who Deng installed, Jiang Zemin, outlasted Deng, who died in 1997. Jiang served as Party General Secretary until 2002, when he handed the job off to Hu Jintao.

According to the Party Constitution, the 2,000 or so party members from provinces, the party bureaucracy, and the military who are selected as delegates to the Party Congress elect the Party's Central Committee and the members of the Party's corruption-fighting body, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission. The 370 or so Central Committee members and alternate members, among them provincial leaders, government ministers, top military leaders, and the heads of Party organizations, then "elect" the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee, and the General Secretary of the Party, and "decide" members of the Party's Central Military Commission.²⁰ In reality, however, the process is top-down, with the Party's most senior leaders deciding on the makeup of the top bodies. The Central Committee ratifies their selections.

In addition to naming Xi General Secretary, the 18th Party Congress is expected to re-appoint him to the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee. The Congress will also name other members of the PSC – likely eight, although the size of the body could change. The interplay between Xi and the other individuals named to the PSC, particularly Hu's reported ally, Li Keqiang, will be crucial to China's direction over the coming years.

When Hu Jintao was named General Secretary in 2002, he had to wait two years before being named to command the military, too. His predecessor, Jiang Zemin, kept the military job in the interim. It is unclear whether Hu will continue as chairman of the Central Military Commission after the 18th Party Congress, or if he will hand the military job to Xi at the 18th Party Congress, too.

The next stage in the succession process will take place at the first session of the 12th National People's Congress in March 2013. At that meeting of China's unicameral legislature, legislators are expected to "elect" Xi State President, the largely ceremonial position that will facilitate his meetings the leaders of non-Communist nations by making him head of state. Once named State President, Xi will nominate a new Premier to lead the Chinese government bureaucracy and manage the economy on a day-to-day basis. Hu's reported ally Li Keqiang remains the leading candidate for that job, although another current Vice Premier, Wang Qishan, is sometimes mentioned as a candidate, too.

If Xi is appointed Chairman of the Party Central Military Commission at the 18th Party Congress, he will be expected to add the title of Chairman of the State Military Commission at the same March 2013 meeting of the National People's Congress. If not, he may have to wait two years, taking on the Party military chairmanship at a Party plenum in 2014, and adding the State military chairmanship at the third session of the 12th National People's Congress in March 2015.

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²⁰ For the relevant text of the Party's constitution see http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-11/18/content_633225_4.htm.

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